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LEAFLET  
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WALTER S. HINCHMAN  
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## QUESTIONS IN LITERATURE TEXTS

"What do you think the earth's full of?" a little child once asked its nurse.

"Oh, ah couldn't say," replied the nurse.

"But what do you guess?" continued the child.

"Ah couldn't guess," was the answer.

"I know!" the child said. "Dead men!"

It is cause for melancholy reflection that the understanding which exists between many teachers and pupils is not inadequately represented by that between the child and its nurse in the foregoing story. This condition no doubt springs partly from the fact that the questions too often are "posers". Children being what they are, they will continue to ask "posers" and we shall have to bear up as best we may. It is rather the questions asked by the teachers which may be discussed, possibly reformed. For suppose a teacher to ask an unsuspecting reader of "Hamlet" (as a teacher, to my knowledge, once did ask), "What evidences of insanity, on purely medical grounds, are there in Hamlet's speeches?"—the pupil might reasonably answer, as the Irishman questioned by the magistrate as to his guilt, "Begorra, it's harrrd enough quistion for your honor to decide, let alone a poor divil loike mesilf." The pupil has no appeal; he stands there for his fate.

Latterly, many philanthropic makers of text-books of literature have set about curing the evil of inappropriate questions by adding lists of questions to their notes. The purpose of these is indisputably good; their value, it would seem, not so certain. It is therefore their value that this paper intends to discuss.

Such questions in text-books of literature attempt either, First, to ascertain the pupil's knowledge of what he has just read; or second, to test his appreciation and to stimulate appreciative thought. The first of these may be dis-

missed as necessary if dull—with the reservation, however, that almost any teacher can probably himself make better questions for *his* class than he can find in a list made by another person for some other class.

Whether or not such questions really test appreciation (not to go into the larger, philosophical doubt as to whether *appreciation* can be *tested* at all) depends partly, of course, on the nature of the questions, but chiefly on the nature of the teacher and his pupils. In any event, therefore,—whatever the questions asked—their usefulness comes back finally to the relation between teacher and boy. You cannot conjure up a particular classroom and frame an ideal set of questions for it any more than you can arrange a conversation beforehand. In conversation there is always the other person, who may not answer according to your plan. In a classroom, there is always the boy as well as the teacher; as someone has immortally remarked: “It takes two to make a teach.” It may even be said that in the majority of cases, if your questions are going to have any inter-relation, you cannot predict entirely what will be asked in your own classroom. One may of course go through a list of questions—resolutely indifferent to the fact that the hearts and minds of one’s class are crying for other things, bent only on getting those questions asked—as per plan; but certainly there is no need to discuss the value of such a performance.

It seems abundantly clear, then, that it does not, after all, matter very much what questions are asked provided they are *a propos*, provided they really set the class forward in understanding and appreciation. For understanding which is to be more than a mere recognition of isolated facts requires, almost as much as appreciation does, spontaneous, interested discussion. What is more, such understanding passes, by imperceptible degrees, into a sort of appreciation and makes possible, what is so often the despair of teachers, actual instruction in appreciation.

To give an illustration of appreciative work in literature is obviously impossible, however, for we are not given here the time and the place and the passage all together; but it is reasonable to suppose that any human being, with whatever mind and heart, can ask a class at least some pertinent questions—if he always says what he honestly thinks and feels, and demands that his pupils do the same, instead of the forlorn practice of saying what they think somebody else thinks they ought to think and feel.

We are reminded every little while, to be sure, of "the man from Kalamazoo" (usually reminded by "the man from Boston"?)—the unfortunate wretch who *will* teach and who of course has not had the advantages which we (Pharisees?) enjoy. Well, isn't it better for him, if he does exist in such unhappy ignorance to plunge, without second-hand, inappropriate questions, *in medias res* and trust, as Henry Ward Beecher did before him, to the good Lord to get him out of the difficulty? Such a man, with a list of questions which are not his own, which he does not wholly understand, which his class not only does not understand, but resents, cannot inspire by his borrowed questions, never really gets in touch with the class. What is more, he (and the pupil by infection) tends to fall into that worst, most facile trait of superficial teaching—appearing to deliver, rather than actually delivering, "the goods". To balance this he has, on the credit side, a modicum of irrelevant facts, which, thus isolated, have at best a negligible value. It would be far better if he has no ideas of his own, for him simply to read (or have the class read) each piece, without any comment whatsoever. For, with all respect to Kalamazoo (I do not believe the poor wretch really resides there), such a man will believe that a cloud is backed like a whale and a weazel and a camel all at once, in one spasm of faith.

But the genial methods of haphazard discussion which I suggest, it is often objected, do not prepare a class to pass Examinations A and B for College Entrance. Perfectly true. Yet have the examiners discovered that the other method, what may be called the hand to mouth method, has produced better results? And have the pupils, confronted later on by a life which cannot use irrelevant knowledge (especially if it be inexact), been thankful for an education which taught them what their teacher said somebody else said about the medical proofs of Hamlet's insanity? Were it not better, on the whole, for them to fail in the examination and then go about earning an honest living?

What is more, the assertion that the lists of questions, although they leave much to be desired, do nevertheless help to some extent begs the main issue. They may seem to have for the moment a sort of ready-made usefulness, but it is a grave question whether any such lists have any real pedagogical value. More often than not, they probably do harm.



All of this discussion raises larger subjects, I am aware; but to confine ourselves to the single point—the value of questions in literature texts—only one thing seems more futile than the preparation of such questions; the use of them in a class for which they were not prepared to inspire appreciation, any questions must spring from the class itself; and no outside person, however astute, can plan an attack which will sufficiently fit special conditions and yet allow the teacher to save his ethics whole. These gymnastics belong in a school of pedagogy. A French captain may study with profit Napoleon's Campaigns, but he can never hope to do exactly the same things in a particular engagement.

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### EDITORIAL NOTES

It has long been a tradition in our Association that only the writer of the *Leaflet* is responsible for the opinions expressed. Were it otherwise, what a variety of mental shiftings would be necessary to maintain our poise and consistency.

This reminder has been penned to prevent our good friend and brilliant leafleteer, Mr. Hinchman, from making any false surmises. With his conclusions many members of the Association will not agree. You see a majority of them have written and edited books, and in these tasks they have done exactly what Mr. Hinchman tells us is pernicious.

We shall gladly admit, however, that if all English teachers had the gift of ingenuity so liberally bestowed upon Mr. Hinchman, his assumption would be true. But few have his gift; few have his experience. Twenty per cent of our English teachers are new each year. They need guidance. More than twenty per cent lack initiative and resourcefulness. They need stimulus. Editors who have been willing to toil for this less gifted and less experienced class have received liberal thanks from these teachers and meagre payment from publishers. What supports them, dost thou ask? The conscience, friend, of knowing that they also serve where royalties are scant.

A slightly different phase of this general topic of virility in English teaching is discussed by the *New York Evening Post* in an editorial which we print entire.

## PROFESSING LITERATURE

The vague but persistent feeling on the part of students and the general public that the teaching of literature at the present time is no better than it should be has found voice again in an address of Sir Gilbert Parker before the Imperial Conference of Teachers' Associations. Possibly out of courtesy to his audience, the speaker conceded that modern methods of instruction have improved, but the burden of his message was a somewhat bitter charge that the prevailing system is hostile to the originality and independence of the student. When the professor of literature and the literary man fall out, as not infrequently happens, the public, which has its own grievances, is likely to side with the man of letters as probably the more valuable, and certainly the more entertaining, member of the commonwealth. Commenting sympathetically upon the speech of the novelist, the *Manchester Guardian* diagnosed the case as follows:

The trouble is that a sort of mandarin learning tends to settle on English literature when it is badly taught, and turns it into a subject about as stimulating to the mind as the collection of postage stamps or cigarette pictures. Badly taught, it accumulates a minute lore of small facts and allusions, and, worse still, it has settled exactly the relationship of every writer to every other writer, his indebtedness to every influence, and exactly what the student ought to think of him. The whole thing could be learned by heart by any one with a good memory without reading a single line of English except the illustrative quotations.

This is doubtless crediting the professor of literature with considerably more than he claims for himself; this perfect science of literary history is not his present state, but the far-off divine event toward which his whole creation moves. If he were actually there, he would probably confront Sir Gilbert Parker and the *Guardian* with the bewildered question, "What else do you expect of me and what more do you want?" And they, exactly as dissatisfied as before, would pause and grope for a reply, as most of us are doing in advance. They might hastily retort that he had defrauded them, that they had come to study with him the great monuments of English literature, and that he had lured and enticed them into the pursuit of a purely academic and antiquarian science of his own. They might—more prudently—admit that accumulated small facts and allusions and relations and influences constitute a considerable part of the subject matter of literature which is directly teachable. And yet they would protest with deep earnestness that the one thing needful was forgot.

Precisely what the great teacher gives to his students which cannot be gained from a text-book or even from the "*Cambridge History of English Literature*" is not so clear. If you interrogate men who have read "*Don Quixote*" with Lowell, or Dante with the late Professor Norton, you are likely to be put off with obscure phrases: it was something in their "brilliant digressions"; it was the "amenity of their personal at-



mosphere"; it was an indefinable "illumination." Most witnesses testify to a certain inner commotion and change which helped them to find themselves. The gift that we are seeking is what the ingenuous Boswell found in himself after a talk at the Mitre with Johnson. It is the virtue that William Hazlitt discovered in his own breast when he touched the hem of the mystical robes of Coleridge. It is the quickened drum-beat that Froude heard in his own pulses when the river of Carlyle's talk flowed over him. To return to the classroom, it is the gift that the young woman sought when she said to her teacher of Shakespeare, "This is all very interesting, but when do we come to the deep things?"

The mere professor in the teacher's chair regards such a question as an indication of most culpable callousness, and he seeks to draw the questioner's attention to more wholesome topics, such as the authenticity of the signatures or the chronology of the three parts of "Henry VI." But the anointed teacher, with a right reverence for the personality of his students, looks upon such a query as a token of spiritual grace and a hint of the improvable greatness in our natures. He knows that the simple-hearted hunger of these young and plastic souls for the magnificent and consolatory things with which he is presumably conversant is his appointed opportunity. Himself primarily concerned with the "deep things," he conceives highly of the function of literature and its interpreters, and presses constantly forward through grammars and lexicons and libraries towards a clearer apprehension of those profound currents of feeling and those master ideas which produce world-literature, and from generation to generation shape the destinies of men. He does not meet his students always with a philological journal in his hands, but sometimes with a fine idea in his head. He dares from time to time to let them forget the sands of the Wilderness and dream of the grapes of Eshcol. He is great enough to imagine the bare possibility of greatness in them, and he is pleased when they aspire. He perceives, at any rate, that they are seeking what he is seeking, and, instead of dictating to them like stenographers, he communicates with them and encourages them like disciples and fellow-pilgrims.

For your true teacher, as distinguished from your popular trifler and your cataloguer and your antiquarian and your descriptive historian, is by necessity what Carlyle called a "believing soul," and he does not shirk the responsibilities of leadership. His colleagues live in a desperate and ill-grounded fear of turning the beam by throwing into the scale the weight of their own judgment; they do not wish to "bias" the minds of their pupils. He, on the other hand, believes that the first step toward intellectual independence is the recognition of intellectual constraint. He believes in giving his pupils something to react against. He is aware that most are intellectually shapeless and inarticulate, incoherent and purposeless. They are full of miscellaneous information and vague appetites and undirected potentialities. They cannot understand why the French and the Russians quarrel about their literary gospels as seriously as they quarrel about their

politics and their religion. They are in need of what the leader of a literary movement gives to his followers and what a timid professorial ethics proscribes—a definite point of view and the rudiments of a literary platform. He leads them to a position from which they can see for themselves the natural links and alliances between literature and the other living issues of the day and age. He does not compel them to side with him, but he compels them to take sides, and so strengthens and clarifies the faith of his adversaries as well as of his friends. He gives, in short, the one thing needful that was not in the text-book: the kindling touch to the judgment and the will, which persuades a man that literature contains important ideas of truth and beauty that concern him. The teacher of literature who has not this gift, though he chart the course from Caedmon to Corelli, is a failure. He will kindle no torch. The troubles with our system is that we try to put the divine fire in a green youth by the obsolete method of rubbing together two dry sticks.

## SELECTED LIST OF RECENT ENGLISH BOOKS

*A Dramatic Version of Greek Myths and Hero Tales* by Fanny Comstock, formerly of the Bridgewater Normal School. 45c. Ginn and Company.

*Handbook for Teachers of English.* Questions and topics for study based on Merrill's English Texts. 50c. Charles E. Merrill Company.

*The English Teacher's Manual*, by L. A. Pittenger, critic in English, Indiana University. A manual of suggestions to accompany the study of Thomas and Howe's *Composition and Rhetoric*. 25c. Longmans, Green, and Company.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, edited by William Strunk, Jr., Professor of English in Cornell University. 25c. R. L. S. Houghton Mifflin Company.

*Le Morte Arthur*. A middle English metrical romance, edited by Samuel B. Hemingway, Ph. D., Instructor in English in Yale University. 40c. R. L. S. Houghton Mifflin Company.

*Home Reading for High School Pupils.* Compiled by Mary H. Dowd, English Department of the Manchester High School, and F. Mabel Winchell, Manchester City Library. 10c. May be secured from the Public Library of Manchester, N. H.

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, edited by Professor Jos. V. Denny, Ohio State University. D. Appleton and Company.

The program for the fall meeting of the Association is printed below. Members are reminded that the meeting will be held in Huntington Hall, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, on Saturday morning, Dec. 14, 1912.

PROGRAM 10 A. M.

- I. The Exact Measurements of Educational Products: Possibilities and Limitations.

PROFESSOR HENRY WYMAN HOLMES,  
Harvard University.

- II. The Hillegas Scale: Tests of its Usefulness in the Newton Schools.

DR. WILLIAM SETCHEL LEARNED,  
Joseph Lee Fellow for Research in Education at  
Harvard University.

- III. Experience with the Hillegas Scale.

MISS MARION W. FLAG,  
Burr School, Newton.

- IV. Experiments in Grading Themes.

DR. PERCY WALDRON LONG,  
Wellesley College.

- V. The Determination of the Standard in English A.

PROFESSOR CHESTER NOYES GREENOUGH,  
Harvard University.

- VI. Efficiency Engineering in the English Department.

MR. OSCAR CHARLES GALLAGHER,  
Boston High School of Commerce.

- VII. Discussion.

MISS MARY I. ADAMS,  
West Roxbury High School.

- VIII. General Discussion.

- IX. Address: Is English "Untaught and Unteachable?"

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